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Kondrup, Sara Vincentzen

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Sustain or supersede – an exploration of the practices of animal product limiters¹

S. V. Kondrup

Department of Food and Resource Economics, University of Copenhagen, Rolighedsvej 25, 1958 Frederiksberg C, Denmark. sak@ifro.ku.dk

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present the theoretical frame of a current PhD project, the research questions that are guiding the project, and some initial hypotheses. To satisfy growing public concerns about the environment, animal welfare, and personal health, animal product limiting (APL), e.g. flexitarianism, vegetarianism and veganism, provides an alternative to the mainstream animal-based diets in the Western world. However, the exclusion of more or less animal products from the diet is done in a continual movement where the social practices of everyday life and institutionalized eating standards for (in)appropriate eating are thought to play a crucial role. The overall objective of this project is to examine how APL is done among a group of newly practicing (<12 months) flexitarians, vegetarians, and vegans in Denmark and how and why changes in dietary practices among these animal product limiters (APLs) occur over time. A practice theoretical perspective on food and eating is integrated as it opens up for a dynamic relation between the micro-social level and the material and discursive circumstances at the macro-level and emphasizes fundamental questions about how social practices are interconnected and change over time. Qualitative and quantitative methods are applied, and the project runs a total of six years (May 2016-May 2022). Thirty informants (10 flexitarians, 10 vegetarians, and 10 vegans) are recruited for the qualitative data collection and four or five rounds of interviews with between six months and one-year intervals will be carried out. The project builds on the claim, that more attention should be paid on how APL is embedded in social practices instead of only focusing on individual articulations of attitudes and choices in order to understand why dietary change occur among APLs.

Keywords: vegetarianism, social change, practice theory

Intro: background and overall objective

There is a broad range of motivational factors for changing one's diet in a direction in which less animal product are included, e.g. the perceived benefits for personal health, due to animal ethical or environmental concerns, spiritual well-being, religious belief, or gustatory arguments (Bedford and Barr 2005; Curtis and Comer 2006; Fessler *et al.* 2003; Fox and Ward 2008; Hoek *et al.* 2004; Hussar and Harris 2010; Lindeman and Sirelius 2001; Wilson *et al.* 2004). These factors are often presented as the ends and purposes of APL, e.g. flexitarian, vegetarian, and vegan diets, but people's understandings, knowledge of and commitments to APL are also influenced by other factors as well such as significant others, e.g. family, friends, idols, mass media and music (Boyle 2007; Devine *et al.* 1998; Haverstock and Forgays 2012; Jabs *et al.* 1998; 2000; Larsson *et al.* 2003; McDonald 2000; Rozin *et al.* 1997), food traditions (Devine *et al.* 1998; Haverstock and Forgays 2012), significant life transitions in location or social roles

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(moving to a new area, attending a new educational institution, marriage, getting a divorce, pregnancy, and change of employment) (Beardsworth and Keil 1992; Devine *et al.* 1998; Jabs *et al.* 1998), and reinforced by social support (Barr and Chapman 2002; Devine *et al.* 1998; Haverstock and Forgays 2012).

A considerable amount of social science and psychological research on vegetarianism and veganism has investigated motivational factors in order to understand why people start to follow vegetarian or vegan diets. By and large, these lines of research have interpreted such forms of APL as markers of distinct identities from rather individualistic perspectives. This approach accounts for some stability in people's foodways and discussions of how and why the dietary practices of APLs alter and potentially disappear over time have been neglected in much research on the subject. Most people do not follow the same dietary route throughout life and APLs do not seem to be an exception to this. Thus, even though APL is often driven by strongly held ethical viewpoints, health beliefs, and/or motivations to change dietary behaviours, recent research suggests that adopting a vegetarian or vegan diet typically is a dietary phase rather than a lifetime commitment (Boyle 2007; Humane Research Council 2014). Furthermore, vegetarians do not seem to follow one specific type of plant-based diet over time but include and exclude food items interchangeably – some vegetarians tend to move in directions in which more animal-derived products are excluded over time (Barr and Chapman 2002; Haverstock and Forgays 2012), while others move in directions in which less animal product are excluded over time (Boyle 2007).

However, we do not know much about the social dynamics of APL in an everyday context and how the dietary practices of APLs are challenged or reinforced over time - resulting in more robust or changing foodways. This project aims to fill this gap by examining how APL is done among a group of newly practicing (<12 months) flexitarians, vegetarians, and vegans in Denmark and how and why changes in dietary practices among these APLs occur over time. Qualitative and quantitative methods are applied as complementary parts of the project and the project will run a total of six years. Thirty informants (10 flexitarians, 10 vegetarians and 10 vegans) between 15-60 years of age who are active partakers in both shopping and cooking are recruited for the qualitative data collection. They are recruited through a recruitment bureau and social media and four/five rounds of interviews with six months - one-year intervals will be carried out. In terms of recruitment, flexitarians are defined as people who primarily eat vegetarian diets with the occasional inclusion of (potentially any) meat. Vegetarians are defined as people who do not eat seafood, pork, poultry or other meat but include dairy products and/or eggs in their diets while vegans are defined as people who abstain from eating any animal products (with the possible exception of honey). Depending on financial support, a survey will be carried out in the Danish population based on the insights gained from the interviews.

Theoretical and analytical approach

The project aims to work with two overall yet interconnected analytical foci that feed into each other: 1) *APL in everyday life* and 2) *The history and institutionalization of APL*. APL is understood as a distinct foodway with different manifestations, e.g. flexitarian, vegetarian, and vegan, that is enacted and embedded in a dynamic field of social practices in everyday life and institutionalized eating standards for (in)appropriate eating that regulate how APL is done. This way of approaching and framing APL is mainly inspired by the works of Elizabeth Shove and colleagues.

Shove and others (2012) argue that practices are organized by a dynamic combination of the following elements: *materials* (e.g. objects such as food and the animals from which the food is made, tools, technologies, cookbooks, social media, the domestic infrastructure of the home, and the wider infrastructures of e.g. food supply), *competences* (e.g. knowledge of how to cook without meat and/or other animal derived products, embodied skills, techniques, creativity and improvisations), and *meanings* (e.g. symbolic and socially shared meanings of protein-dense diets/plant-based diets, cultural conventions of meat-eating/vegetarianism/veganism, ideas, expectations, aspirations) (p. 14). These three elements permeate embodied and discursive processes although not as specific features of the individual human beings but rather as characteristics of the practices that the individuals engage in (Reckwitz 2002).

A practice theoretical approach to APL challenges ideas of how individual choices foster new behaviour that seem to be specifically influential in contemporary consumption discourses and policymaking as well as in much research on APL. Such ideas take for granted that individuals have control over their surroundings and that they are solely responsible for their ‘own’ attitudes and actions. Instead, human action and structure are seen as recursively related (Giddens 1984): social structure is produced and reproduced by everyday behaviour while it at the same time limits and enables everyday behaviour. It is due to the recursively organization of practices that ‘the constitution of agents and structures are not two independently given sets of phenomena, a dualism, but represents a duality’ (Giddens 1984, p. 25). These statements represent an important starting point for an integrated analysis of how and why APL is done and change over time where the individual is always viewed in a social context.

1) *APL in everyday life*

Stressing the first analytical focus, *APL in everyday life*, the dietary practices of APLs are framed as ‘bundles of practices’: ‘loose knit patterns based on co-location and co-existence’ (Shove *et al.* 2012, p. 17 & 81). Various forms and levels of, for example, planning, cooking, shopping, and eating practices are loosely integrated in these bundles of practices, and shape how APL is done and divided into different manifestations of APL. In order to understand how and why the dietary practices of APLs appear, alter, and potentially disappear in an everyday context the following questions are raised: ‘how are flexitarian, vegetarian, and vegan practices organized, e.g. what are the materials, competences, and meanings (Shove *et al.* 2012) that coordinate these practices?’, ‘how do the materials, competences, meanings, and the coordination between them differentiate between flexitarian, vegetarian, and vegan practices and change over time?’, and ‘how are flexitarian, vegetarian, and vegan practices challenged or reinforced by other social practices in everyday life?’. Interviews with APLs and a questionnaire survey are the main sources of material in this part of the analysis.

According to Shove and others, the ‘elements which constitute the practice as entity’ are interdependent in distinct configurations and it is through the recurrent performances that these configurations are reproduced and sustained over time (Shove *et al.* 2012, p. 7). By implication, practices are then susceptible to change when the connections between the elements are broken, made, and when new combinations occur (Shove *et al.* 2012, p. 21). Several studies have found that there are different learning phases, processes, or stages that develop after people have commenced vegetarian diets (e.g. Boyle 2007; Roth 2005; Rozin *et al.* 1997). For example, what begins as merely a food preference can turn into more comprehensive vegetarian practices in which health, the environment, animals, humanitarianism, and spirituality become important. Such transformations in the meanings of the vegetarian practices where more pronounced sensitivities to food, meat, and the body typically occur could then stimulate a modification in

materials by the exclusion of more animal products which subsequently could lead to the formation of vegan practices. On the other hand, certain levels of ‘re-routinization’ of APL in everyday life without a continual reaffirmation of the underlying rationalizations are also expected to occur (Warde 2016, p. 82) which could lead to a continuance of current practices.

In much the same way as elements rely on certain interdependencies for a specific type of practice to exist, practices also interrelate in time and space and thereby influence each other. ‘Bundles and complexes of practices’ can appear and disappear due to the ‘collaboration and/or competition between practices’ (Shove *et al.* 2012, p. 88). By repeating certain combinations of practices, the terms on which practices are performed, compete or collaborate, are thought to change. Based on these assumptions, it is suggested here that competing and collaborating practices in the everyday lives of APLs, e.g. parental, relationship, cooking, shopping, and work practices challenge or reinforce how APL is done. In this regard, studies have found that most of the opposition to vegetarianism comes from family members (Jabs *et al.* 1998; Roth 2005) which could indicate that the elements of family practices are not compatible with the elements of vegetarian practices which subsequently pose a threat to the family’s traditions. This further supports the initial suggestion, that attention should not only be paid to individual attitudes and choices in order to understand why dietary change occur among APLs but also to the interrelations between occurring practices in everyday life.

2) *The history and institutionalization of APL*

One implication of approaching APL from a practice theoretical perspective is to look specifically to the characteristics of the dietary practices of APLs without neglecting the embodied experiences of the individual APLs and also to connect the everyday practices of APLs to the macro-institutional context. Some APLs are expectedly more likely to identify themselves as ‘flexitarian’, ‘vegetarian’, and ‘vegan’ than others, some are more explicit and insisting in their knowledge dissemination and attempts to recruit other people while others may act silently and reticently. However, contemporary ways of practicing APL – of cooking, shopping, and eating plant-based foods, are believed to be inextricably linked to the social and national history in which these practices occur (Delormier 2009; Graça 2016; Halkier 2011) and guided by the ways in which APL is institutionalized. The second analytical focus, *The history and institutionalization of APL*, therefore asks ‘what are appropriate performances of flexitarian, vegetarian, and vegan practices?’ and ‘how do the dynamics that power these appropriate performances work against the consumption of animal-based diets and how have they developed throughout history?’. A combination of primary and secondary sources of material will be the basis for this analysis, i.e. interviews with APLs, historical documents, and academic papers presenting the results from other empirical and historical studies.

Although there is no authoritative model for ways of practicing APL, APLs participate in flexitarian, vegetarian, and vegan practices in ways that are socially organized and institutionalized – by certain sets of shared norms, conventions, rules, standards, and justifications (Warde 2014). This organization and institutionalization is a feature of its history and of the social and continuous process of defining specific food items and practises as (un)healthy, (non)ethical, and (in)appropriate which are influenced by a number of entities and bodies such as interest groups and organizations, cookbooks, how-to videos, the food industry, celebrities, grocery stores, menus at cafes and restaurants, dietitians, doctors etc. For example, recent changes in the ways in which know-how of plant-based cooking is distributed through the extensive stream of how-to videos on several digital platforms have made learning easier and more accessible and likely contribute to setting standards for the competences of plant-

based cooking and aesthetics of plant-based meals. Other developments that likely play a part in the institutionalization of APL are potential changes in the symbolic meanings of meat and plant-based food where the latter seems to evolve into more and more appropriate foods and meat the opposite, changes in the logistics of flexitarian, vegetarian, and vegan practices potentially moving from a more private setting to a public where plant-based meals are more acceptable and accessible, and positive changes in wider infrastructures of the supply of plant-based foods and meat subsidies.

Outro

In order to shed light on how and why changes in the dietary practices of APLs occur, this project aims to study a group of current APLs over a period of four to five years which has not been done before, to my knowledge. The social organization and dynamics of APL are explored from a practice theoretical approach which will hopefully provide new insight into how flexitarian, vegetarian, and vegan practices are challenged or reinforced in everyday life and how the eating conventions and standards that are acting out in APLs' social circles and spheres regulate the dietary routes of APLs. The project is also carried out at a time when technical and material innovations such as meat subsidies have become increasingly available and popular.

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